



MARK JENKIN'S THE CINEMATIC DNA OF ENYS MEN

# Jeanne Dielman

## 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles

It took a reference to *Jeanne Dielman* in an *Enys Men* review to make me consider the impact of this film upon my own work. The confrontational camera, the sparse dialogue, the performances devoid of grand gesture or faux emotion are all there, but the gradual subversion of a strict routine is the obvious starting point when it comes to its influence.

Mark Jenkin

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

In January 1976 *Le Monde* heralded Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* as 'the first masterpiece in the feminine in the history of the cinema'. The unconventional style (frontally centred images, elliptical and disjunctive editing) and subject (a woman's alienation from her daily routine as a housewife and involvement in a discrete form of prostitution that leads her to murder) made the film a powerful sign of a decade when feminism erupted into the arena of politics and film. In *Jeanne Dielman* Akerman conveyed the insistent presence of a viewpoint outside the story proper: her own – a young woman absorbed by the world of her mother's generation. And her film still seems remarkably modern, all three hours and 20 minutes of it.

But *Jeanne Dielman* was not the only groundbreaking film Akerman made during the 70s. Her handful of completed works posit cinema as a developing artform that every new film should advance. Partly thanks to dedicated programmers, sympathetic distributors and screening venues and committed journals, these films gained a high profile and attracted an increasingly engaged, passionate audience. This 70s infrastructure probably seems more distant now than the fiery polemics around feminism and film, but it was every bit as central to what people talked and wrote about.

Akerman the filmmaker came of age at the same time as the new age of feminism, and *Jeanne Dielman*, *Je, tu, il, elle* (1974) and *News from Home* (1976) became key texts in the nascent field of feminist film theory. Feminism posed the apparently simple question of who speaks when a woman in film speaks (as character, as director...); Akerman insisted convincingly that her films' modes of address rather than their stories alone are the locus of their feminist perspective.

The many arguments about what form a 'new women's cinema' should take revolved around a presumed dichotomy between so-called realist (meaning accessible) and avant-garde (meaning elitist) work; Akerman's films rendered such distinctions irrelevant and illustrated the reductiveness of the categories. That her films were openly autobiographical, yet in a stylised, indirect manner, and that the aspect of her life she often represented concerned her

relationship with her mother attracted great interest. And her role as actress in the long, nude, lesbian sex scene at the end of *Je, tu, il, elle*, filmed in an uncomfortably direct yet distanced manner, provided a startling new perspective on voyeurism, exhibitionism and the woman's image on screen. Made by a crew composed almost exclusively of women and a 24-year-old female director working outside the dominant system and the norms of length, plot, visualisation and address, *Jeanne Dielman* was seen as a model for a cinema of the future in which filmmakers would embrace woman-centred means of expression as well as content. One of the aspects of Akerman's visual style that was most noted was the separation she maintained between the visual field occupied by the camera, which she has often equated with her own view, and the field observed by the camera. There is an absence of the conventional shot/reverse-shot rhetoric of editing and a skilled use of ellipsis that emphasises the separation of these two fields. A choice has been made not to draw the viewer into the psychological depths of dramatic verisimilitude.

Akerman called *Jeanne Dielman* a feminist film, but not a militant one: Jeanne is neither a role model nor an example of a victim. The film chronicles three days in the life of a middle-class Belgian widow who cares for her teenage son; she has maintained her role as housewife and her routine inside her home, each moment taken up by a specific task, by becoming a discrete prostitute, receiving a respectable man nearly wordlessly each afternoon. But her order is disrupted by the second client, probably because of an unwanted sexual orgasm, and she is unable to put back the pieces after having so carefully defended herself against intrusion into her private world. On the third day, she murders the man after they have sex. 'Jeanne Dielman's defences had snapped and I wanted to demonstrate that with the strongest sign of her oppression: prostitution... Jeanne Dielman kills to regain her order.' The protagonist's daily routine is shown in minute detail, except for the bedroom scenes. There, we enter only on the last day and are kept at a distance.

Akerman stated in an interview with *Camera Obscura*: 'I do think it's a feminist film because I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman. They are the lowest in the hierarchy of film images. A kiss or a car crash comes higher, and I don't think that's accidental. It's because these are women's gestures that they count for so little.'

Akerman once thought of dedicating *Jeanne Dielman* to her mother, and in an interview she described her love for the mother's gestures which she observed with so much care. 'I was looking with a great deal of attention and the attention wasn't distanced... For me, the way I looked at what was going on was a look of love and respect... I let her live her life in the middle of the frame... I let her be in her space. It's not uncontrolled. But the camera was not voyeuristic in the commercial way because you always knew where I was. You know, it wasn't shot through the keyhole.' Yet Akerman's point of view and framing also represent the director's control over the mother's every movement – perhaps the will to omnipotence that motivates every child, but given Akerman's mother's refusal to speak about what must have seemed to be the most important thing in her past, the stakes were surely higher.

**Janet Bergstrom, *Sight and Sound*, November 1999**

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**JEANNE DIELMAN****23, QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES**

*Director:* Chantal Akerman

*Production Companies:* Paradise Films, Unité 3, Ministère de la Culture

*Producers:* Evelyne Paul, Corinne Jenart

*Assistant Directors:* Marilyn Watelet, Serge Brodsky, Marianne de Muylder

*Screenplay:* Chantal Akerman

*Director of Photography:* Babette Mangolte

*Editor:* Patricia Canino

*Assistant Editors:* Catherine Huhardeaux, Martine Chicot

*Art Director:* Philippe Graff

*Assistant Art Director:* Jean-Pol Ferbus

*Make-up:* Eliane Marcus

*Sound Recording:* Benie Deswarte, Françoise van Thienen

*Sound Re-recording:* Jean-Paul Loublrier

*Sound Editor:* Alain Marchall

**Cast**

Delphine Seyrig (*Jeanne Dielman*)

Jan Decorte (*Sylvain Dielman*)

Henri Storck (*1st caller*)

Jacques Doniol-Valcroze (*2nd caller*)

Yves Bical (*3rd caller*)

Chantal Akerman (*voice of neighbour*)

Belgium/France 1975

201 mins

Restoration carried out from the original camera negative and in close collaboration with Chantal Akerman. Courtesy of the Royal Film Archive of Belgium – Cinematek.

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**MARK JENKIN'S THE CINEMATIC DNA OF ENYS MEN****Walkabout + Oss Oss Wee Oss**

Sun 1 Jan 13:10; Mon 9 Jan 20:30

**The Stone Tape + Journey to Avebury**

Mon 2 Jan 15:40

**Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles**

Wed 4 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:15

**Symptoms + Stigma**

Fri 6 Jan 18:10; Sun 15 Jan 15:30

**Lost Highway + Jaunt**

Fri 6 Jan 20:15; Sun 22 Jan 18:10

**Haunters of the Deep****+ The Living and the Dead Episode 2**

Sun 8 Jan 13:20; Sat 14 Jan 20:40

**Long Weekend + Between the Tides**

Tue 10 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 20:30

**Penda's Fen + A Warning to the Curious**

Wed 11 Jan 17:50

**Two Years at Sea + A Portrait of Ga**

Sat 14 Jan 18:00 (+ intro and Q&A with Mark Jenkin and Ben Rivers);

Tue 24 Jan 20:45

**Daguerréotypes + World of Glory**

Sun 15 Jan 12:00 (+ intro by Mark Jenkin); Thu 26 Jan 20:50

**Bait**

Sun 15 Jan 18:00; Mon 30 Jan 20:50

**Requiem for a Village + The Signalman**

Fri 27 Jan 18:20; Tue 31 Jan 20:40

**Berberian Sound Studio + Wind**

Sun 29 Jan 15:30 (+ intro by Mark Jenkin and Peter Strickland);

Tue 31 Jan 18:10

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